

37th meeting of the ICA/SIO – European University Institute – 25th May 2011

Workshop: Research Programmes on the Histories of International Organisations:
Methodologies and Results.

Geert Van Goethem
(Amsab-Institute of Social History/Ghent University)

Documenting and researching the interaction between civil society and international organisations. The case of 'Labour'.

Draft-please don't quote.

The transnational turn in Labour History

In E. P. Thompson's classic work "The making of the English working class", a milestone in labour history, the ordinary man and woman became visible. Until then Labour History had often been dominated by structural and institutional issues and had frequently rendered services to these structures and institutions. New analytical categories such as class, gender, race and even religion, marked the beginning of 'history from below'. Still, the frame of reference remained 'national' or, at best, 'Western'. It was precisely this methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism, which was criticised by prominent historians such as Marcel Van der Linden and Jürgen Kocka. Since then, their alternative, Global Labour History, has offered a challenging framework containing a range of issues and perspectives, because its main focus is on transnational, global and cross-chronological influences, developments and movements, not that much on the topics themselves.

International activities of the organised labour movement did not get any attention from historians for a long time due to this 'national' imperative. Moreover, when 'history

from below' was increasingly attracting attention, resulting in an almost dogmatic aversion to institutions and organisations, the latter wasn't quite helpful either. Nevertheless, the past decade has seen a stream of publications focusing on the formation of international organisations of the labour movement. Publications by Susan Milner¹, Anthony Carew², Bob Reinalda³, Patrick Pasture⁴, Reiner Tosstorff⁵, I myself⁶ and, recently, Magaly Garcia-Rodriguez⁷ have filled a gap in labour history and given a fresh impulse to a new institutional approach, rejecting the 'uncritical, untheoretical and celebratory mode' of 'old labour history'.⁸ Taking an interest in the development of international organisations definitely fitted into the preconceived notion of the 'end' of 'national history' (Van der Linden) and the development of a transnational approach to the study of transnational social movements. So, it was about applying a 'transnational approach' to a 'transnational' topic. The main starting point was different now: we were no longer comparing different national phenomena, as had been so typical of different projects in the field of international historiography. The 'national' paradigm was abandoned.

We were looking for a new definition of Labour as well. It is perhaps paradoxical that the awareness of the importance of international organisational forms of labour movements was paralleled by the raising awareness that these movements were only reaching out to their membership, the people with regular labour contracts, whose interests they are to safeguard. However, many people all over the world work without written employment contracts or are self-employed.. Large segments of the labour market are not regulated at all. It is in those sectors and areas, often in southern countries which are peripheral to Western business hotspots, that the worst forms of exploitation (child labour, forced labour) take place. So, the widening of the definition of the concept of Labour was paralleled by the widening of the geographical perspective and a stronger focus on diversity, which has stimulated the development of a transnational research approach in line with the Global Labour History approach even more. On the other hand, research on labour movement international NGOs has provided insights into the intensive interaction between these NGOs and international agencies, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Given its unique tripartite structure, ILO is an agency in which interaction between civil society and the public domain has virtually been institutionalized. From a research point of view it was, therefore, a logical conclusion to focus more closely on interactions between these components, but also 'to open the box' (Kott) and examine the way in which ILO can trigger a process of de-nationalisation and establish a legitimacy of its own.

The forthcoming ILO centenary celebrations, in 2019, provide an excellent opportunity to expand these research activities. We gathered a number of researchers for the first time in 2007, at a conference in Brussel, which was jointly organised by Amsab-ISG, the IISH and the Universities of Ghent and Brussels. The follow-up conference took place in Geneva, in 2009, jointly organised by the Universities of Geneva and Paris X. Several publications resulted from both conferences.⁹ Analysis of the contributions reveals the following key issues. A lot of attention is paid to: the biographical element, ideas and the history of ideas, the ‘process’ of internationalization and the development of standards, to ‘regional’ developments and to ‘non-regular’ employment. We expect these issues to feature also prominently in research in the near future.

The transnational turn within labour history has stimulated interest in the history of International Organisations.

Labour history and, by extension, social history have added their perspectives by stimulating interest in: civil society the impact on ordinary people (history from below)
--

Beyond Labour

The transnational turn of Labour History is not so unusual. The transnational perspective is present everywhere and generally accepted within the wider field of Social History, although it has often been defined in different ways. Political history, diplomatic history, environmental history and other more or less related subdisciplines (migration, gender, social conflict) have also rejected the national paradigm. In theory that should provide new opportunities for cross-disciplinary cooperation, but in practice that turns out to be difficult. Reviewing a recent forum on Labor History, set up by *Diplomatic History*, Victor Silverman has pointed out that this was a unique project.¹⁰ Despite lots of calls for cooperation, we keep on organising ourselves within our own networks, clinging on to our own forms of international cooperation and our own specialist journals. Given that a lot of attention has

been recently paid to international organisations, it is legitimate to consider the study of these organisations to be a separate subdiscipline and to set up projects which bring together people involved in such research.

The History of International Organisations Network(HION), which was founded in 2008 and aims “to unite the many researchers working on the history of international organisations” and “to promote collaboration between researchers, archivists and international civil servants”, can make a very important contribution to the success of such projects, provided ,of course, it evolves into a real international network from an organisational point of view. Perhaps we can start organising biannual conferences. Other networks, such as IPSA and ESSHC, can provide an example for such conferences. Universities and research institutes can take turns in setting them up.

I am also in favour of establishing a peer reviewed journal, with an experienced editorial board, which is able to steer the research agenda and provide opportunities for academics involved in this field of research to publish. Such a journal should, in my opinion, work with Open access, which would make it even more attractive. Indeed, Open access articles are quoted twice as much.¹¹ And there is another strong argument for Open access: we should ensure that researchers in developing countries have access to research results, since libraries in these countries often lack the financial means to pay for costly subscriptions.

I think we should also reflect deeply on the scope of research in the field of international organisations. I was surprised to read that, according to Sandrine Kott¹², international organisations started to emerge in 1919, when the International Labour Organisation was founded. I cannot share that opinion. I take the view that we should not restrict the history of international organisations to UN-related organisations. On the contrary, we should also include their predecessors and the formation of international organisations as such in our research. So, we should start in 1815, after the Napoleonic wars. It was the Congress of Vienna which had started off a process of increasing international regulation, initially via conferences and follow-up conferences. Then, from the mid-19th century onwards, permanent institutions were established.¹³ It is important to put the development of international organisations in the wider context of evolving world politics. It is equally important not to restrict ourselves to IGOs, but also to involve INGOs.

If HION is to accomplish its mission, it should evolve into a worldwide network, regularly setting up conferences in different parts of the world.

An international journal on the history of international organisations, committed to Open access, can provide a strong incentive to carry out research, and to reach out to researchers in developing countries.

We should sufficiently widen the scope of research on international organisations, both chronologically and with respect to the nature (private-public) of international organisations

Archives and research

How well prepared are we?

This forum needn't discuss the importance of archives. Both the challenges and opportunities which are offered by the modern technological developments, are well known to us, archivists. I think we all agree that digitisation provides possibilities which are unprecedented in history and which relate both to long-term preservation and accessibility of materials. But at the same time new inequalities are imminent, particularly in countries where other things should be dealt with first, as the costs of digitisation and of preserving large digital files are high. It is most likely that, in many countries and organisations, we are now forever losing digital born content. And it is not inconceivable that digital files will get lost in the long/short term, because of rising hardware and software maintenance costs. Archival institutions have to tackle this issue and take the initiative in promoting '*archival awareness*¹⁴'. Plans have already been developed by ICA to do so. For example, during last year's 'archives without borders' conference in Den Haag, the new ICA chairman, Martin Berendse, painted an optimistic picture of the future, relishing the prospect of worldwide cooperation between archivists 'to appraise preserve and give access to one worldwide archival collection'.¹⁵

I don't know if such a prospect will ever materialise and I even have some doubts about it, but perhaps building up, a *worldwide archival collection of international organisations*, would be a fine step forward.

I am convinced that the UNESCO 'Memory of the World' programme will give a great boost to the worldwide promotion of this Archive Awareness. At present three archives of international organisations are on the list. But I think that more archives can surely qualify for recognition, private international organisations included.

Europeana also deserves to be mentioned, as Best Practices Networks, which are also important to archives, are subsidized in this way. Let me refer to the APEnet project (Archives Portal Europe) in particular, a partnership of 17 national archives, which will develop an online gateway to archival materials in Europe, of which the first version is now online¹⁶. And let me also mention HOPE (Heritage of the People's Europe)¹⁷, a network of 11 private archival institutions, including Amsab-ISG and the IISH, whose ambition it is to provide access to 3 million digital objects, including many archival documents. In addition to that, HOPE will also develop a Labour History Portal and a common digital repository for private archives which are willing to divide costs related to the long-term preservation of their digital files. The latter is particularly important. Of course, we should not underestimate costs which are related to digitisation; nevertheless, they are but a fraction of the costs related to long-term preservation. And, as private archival institutions, we will probably not be able to continue to bear such heavy costs. Moreover, we are also affected by the changing policy options of our governments. Cooperation between archives is unavoidable.

These BPN networks have just been launched. They provide good prospects for research on international organisations. Currently, the headword 'international organisations' gets about 800 hits on Archives Portal Europe, which is quite a good result regarding an experiment involving only about 725.000 documents¹⁸.

'Databased' History

Researchers and archivists sometimes have different agendas, but they also have strong parallel interests. Researchers can receive strong public support for saving and preserving archives, as they are safeguarding the memory of mankind. Consequently, archives aren't destroyed that easily any more, which, in turn, serves the interests of the researchers.

Archives should therefore also promote and facilitate research. Moreover, archival institutions are durable institutions, while research projects are, of course, time-limited.

Archives are therefore interesting partners in developing classic and new ways of access and in setting up large research databases. Although such databases have already become widely accepted by the exact sciences, social scientists still feel inclined to enjoy solitary work

The ‘historical sample of the Netherlands’(IISH)¹⁹ is a fine example of how cooperation between archival institutions and researchers is mutually beneficial. Another exemple is the ODIS-database²⁰. A joint project of 4 Belgian universities and 4 private archives. It has a similar ambition: to develop a database fed by both archives and researchers. In my opinion, such databases can be particularly useful for research on international organisations. Indeed, it is obvious that the research community too should develop new ways and forms of cooperation. Let me conclude by sharing the optimism which has been expressed by Martin Berendse: individual researchers and archives, by developing common research databases, can play a role in establishing a ‘worldwide research community’ on International Organisations.

New inequalities are imminent as a result of rising costs of digitisation and long-term preservation of large digital files

International programmes such as ‘memory of the world’ are vital to the promotion of archival awareness

Researchers and archivists can jointly develop research databases

¹ Suzan Milner, *The Dilemmas of Internationalism, French Syndicalism and the International Labour Movement, 1900-1914*, Oxford:Berg,1990.

² Anthony Carew, a.o. *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2000.

-
- ³ Bob Reinalda (ed.), *The International Transportworkers Federation, 1914-1945: The Edo Fimmen Era*, Amsterdam: Stichting Beheer IISG, 1997.
- ⁴ Patrick Pasture, *Histoire de Syndicalisme Chrétien international: la difficile recherche d'une troisième voie*, Paris :L'Harmattan, 1999.
- ⁵ Reiner Tosstorff, *Moskau oder Amsterdam, 1921-1937*, Habitationsschrift, Universität Mainz, 1999.
- ⁶ Geert Van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International. The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913-1945*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.
- ⁷ Magaly Rodríguez García, *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defence of Labour Liberalism in Europe and Latin America, 1949-1969*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.
- ⁸ Ira Katznelson, ILWCH, 46, 1994, pp. 7-32
- ⁹ Jasmien Van Daele, Magaly Rodriguez Garcia, Geert Van Goethem, Marcel van der Linden (eds), *ILO Histories. Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World During the Twentieth Century*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2010. Isabelle Lespinet-Moret, Vincent Viet (eds), *L'Organisation internationale du travail. Origine-Développement-Avenir*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2011
- ¹⁰ Special Forum "Workers, Labor and War: New Directions in the History of American Foreign Relations.", *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 24: No.4 (September 2010): 641-731, reviewed by Victor Silverman, H-Diplo Article Reviews, 20 December 2010
- ¹¹ Gunther Eysenbach, *The Open Acces Advantage*, J Med Internet Res 2006;8(2):e8.
- ¹² Sandrine Kott, Studying International Organizations. Milestones for a Transnational History of the International Labour Organization (1919-1939).
- ¹³ Bob Reinalda, *Routledge History of International Organizations. From 1815 to the Present Day*, London: Routledge, 2009
- ¹⁴ The Archive Awareness Campain (AAC) in the UK has been successful in generating public interest for the cause of archives: <http://www.archiveawareness.com>.
- ¹⁵ Speech Martine Berendse, Conference 'Archives Without Borders', August 31, 2010, Peace Palace, The Hague.
- ¹⁶ www.apenet.eu
- ¹⁷ www.peoplesheritage.eu
- ¹⁸ www.archivesportaleurope.eu
- ¹⁹ <http://www.iisg.nl/hsn>
- ²⁰ www.odis.be